

GREENER VISION

Avatar, the highest-grossing box-office film of all time, releases to Blu-ray/DVD to coincide with the 40th anniversary of Earth Day, putting the focus squarely on director James Cameron's favourite themes – conservation and eco-harmony. Gillian Cumming spoke to the committed greenie in Los Angeles

JAMES Cameron's first viewing of *Avatar* ended with its director in tears.

"I cried. I hated the movie after the first screening," he reveals. "I hated the movie after the first four screenings. I just didn't like it. It wasn't what I wanted it to be."

On the eve of its worldwide release to Blu-ray/DVD, it's hard to believe that the film that's taken a record-breaking \$2.8 billion at the box office could have caused such despair.

But Cameron's anguish was brief. After each of those four viewings of the revolutionary CGI-3D *Avatar*, the 55-year-old director dubbed "King of the World" after his colossal 1998 *Titanic* success returned to the editor's booth to fine tune his latest masterpiece, a redemptive tale that pits the extra-tall blue Na'vi, natives of the moon Pandora, against invading human environmental terrorists.

"It was back to the cutting room the next day. Every time you screen the film for yourself you think you've accomplished something and then you go, 'Argh, it's not working. I'm not feeling it'."

"The danger was I didn't know if I was already numb to the movie or I wasn't feeling it because the movie would not induce that in anyone. I finally got to the point in the last screening and said, 'Now I feel it'."

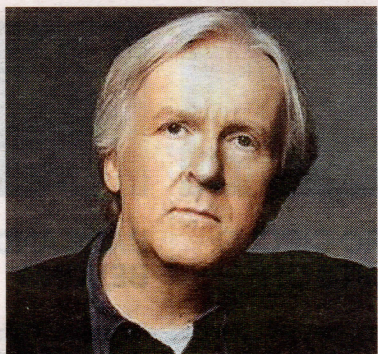
Cameron's lifelong interest in protecting the environment led him to choose the 40th anniversary of Earth Day this month to release *Avatar* to Blu-ray/DVD in the US.

He has also embarked on a campaign to plant one million trees on behalf of the film.

"I've always been a greenie, since before that term existed," says the veteran filmmaker.

"In high school, the first thing I wrote was a play called *The Extinction Syndrome* about how human beings are basically a bunch of lemmings that are busy destroying our planet and each other."

"That was when I was 16, so things haven't changed very much. That would have been around the time of the first Earth Day. Here we are 40 years later releasing the *Avatar* DVD and we're in the same hot water we were then, except worse."



For Cameron, the opportunity to tie-in with Earth Day resonated with the theme of the film.

"I sparked to that as a way *Avatar* could do some good by connecting with environmental groups and raising awareness. People have an emotional reaction to *Avatar* but don't know what to do about it. Earth Day shows people there are things they can do in their lives that will make a difference... and reforestation is one

of the best things we can be doing."

Despite *Avatar*'s strong environmental hooks, Cameron did not foresee the response to his film from indigenous groups.

"Indigenous peoples threatened with the destruction of their homelands or being displaced have reacted to the film and said, 'That's me,'" he says.

"I related the film's theme more to the manifest-destiny period in American history when we were displacing native Americans, even though I knew things were happening in the Amazon where indigenous cultures

Indigenous peoples threatened with the destruction of their homelands or being displaced have reacted to the film and said, 'That's me'

are being threatened. One of the most astonishing images that came to me through the internet was of a bunch of Ashwar tribal leaders in their regalia who had been bussed out of the Amazon in Ecuador to a screening of *Avatar* in an IMAX theatre in Quito – the first movie they ever saw.

"They spoke Spanish as well as their native language. One of the women said afterwards, 'This is a very

good movie and the problem of the people in the film is the same as our problem, but they chose to solve the problem by fighting and we want to solve the problem through dialogue, so we think this movie needs a better message'. Punked by one of the people I'm trying to help!" he laughs.

Cameron, the director of *The Terminator*, *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* and *Aliens*, has long pitted man against machine or against nature.

"*Avatar* is my way as an artist of saying that human nature is violent, is aggressive, is destructive to nature, but we don't have to be that way. We can be like the Na'vi. We step outside ourselves as we watch *Avatar* and look back at ourselves as nature sees us. And then we make our own judgments about what we need to do."

"Hopefully, kids will relate to the film on that level as well – the idea that we have to be warriors for our planet or we're not going to survive."

This Thursday's Blu-ray/DVD release in Australia signals several other developments for *Avatar* fans that include an expansive and interactive *Avatar* Program (see breakout) and the promise of the film's re-release to cinema in August with up to six additional minutes of footage. Also, the movie will be re-released to Blu-ray/DVD in November with additional behind-the-scenes footage, interviews and extras.

Producer Jon Landau says going to Blu-ray/DVD now "opens the door for people who have not yet seen *Avatar*".

"This guy Jake in a wheelchair – in the beginning you don't see as a hero, but he becomes the ultimate hero

reminding audiences that inside each of us is the potential to be a hero in dealing with the environmental issues of today."

Landau believes *Avatar* can easily co-exist in cinemas and on Blu-ray/DVD.

"We could not put together the quality of added-value material for an April release of *Avatar*, so the November release will have a documentary that chronicles the odyssey that was the four-year making of the movie, some deleted scenes for discussion and an in-depth look at the visual effects."

As for the much-touted sequel to *Avatar*, Landau is unequivocal: "Jim has done sequels twice in his career and both times he's made better movies than the first movie – *Terminator 2* and *Aliens*. We're only going to venture into an *Avatar* sequel if the script is there and it warrants being made into a movie."

Cameron is more confident: "I had a lot of ideas for the ongoing *Avatar* story and I will use some of those ideas, but it's also a journey. The reaction of indigenous groups and the awareness it has raised in me and what I've learned from dealing with these groups – I'm going to change the story."

In the meantime, this week's release to Blu-ray/DVD will add a surprising new dimension to the film.

"Everybody thought the best viewing conditions for *Avatar* was 3D, but in 3D we struggle with light levels – because 3D glasses cut the light in half and because of the poor infiltration of the projector, which cuts light in half again," Cameron ex-



Avatar program

USING a code implanted in copies of the *Avatar* Blu-ray/DVD, fans can register at avatarmovie.com and hop on board the Avatar Program, accessing bonus material, content and offers.

In support of Earth Day, fans can adopt one of the one million trees to be planted in 15 countries worldwide by the end of 2010, and track the location of a virtual tree.

The Avatar Program also includes:

PANDORAMA

Via webcam, fans can immerse themselves in the world of Pandora (pandorama.avatar-movie.com).

PANDORAPEDIA

Find out hundreds of facts in this official 350-page guide to Pandora (pandorapedia.com)

that includes information on the science and culture of the imaginary planet.

IMMERSIVE TRAILER

An interactive tool to allow fans to click on any part of the Blu-ray/DVD for details on characters, locations and more.

INTERACTIVE DESKTOP WALLPAPER

Delivering instant access to Avatar newsfeeds, video, social network updates and exclusive content.

plains. "Part of the reason for getting such a bright, crisp dynamic picture in Blu-ray is the extra dynamic range you get with the brightness coming off the TV monitor."

In fact, Cameron agrees that some viewers might derive a better appreciation of *Avatar* on Blu-ray.

"Some people have said that. As immersive as the 3D experience is, it sort of makes the movie about that as opposed to about the aesthetics of the film, the characters, and so on.

"Brightness is something we struggle with in 3D theatres. We have to constantly get the exhibitors to push their projectors up to their highest brightness setting. That's why 2D prints of the film look bright and beautiful and clear. And the 2D Blu-ray is incredible.

"I've been thinking a lot about why the film connected with people so much and I realised that what I was trying to do was create a lucid dream state when you're watching the film. I thought, if I can connect an audience to a collective unconscious, it bypasses all the politics and bullshit and connects us all to that childhood dream state when the world was magical and infinite and scary and cool."

And if you're wondering whatever happened to the alien sex scenes dropped from the original film, Cameron says they could add some spice to the six extra minutes of footage in *Avatar*'s cinema re-release in August.

"Or we may save it (the sex scenes) for the November special edition deluxe box set," he grins.

Avatar Blu-ray/DVD is released on Thursday.

Know your Na'vi

ALMOST five years ago Professor Paul Frommer, a linguist at the University of Southern California, responded to an email request from James Cameron's production company, Lightstorm Entertainment, to develop a new language for an imaginary alien world.

"The email literally changed my life," explains Frommer.

They've formed their own website

To construct the Na'vi language for *Avatar*, Frommer asked Cameron what he wanted the language to sound like. Should it have clicks and guttural sounds or varying tones? Cameron liked ejective consonants, best described as a popping utterance.

Once he had a sound palette, Frommer began to develop the language's grammatical structure.

Towards the end of 2006 the professor's *Speak Na'vi* booklet began to be used to teach *Avatar*'s cast to pronounce the language. Na'vi language boot camps followed.

With more than 1000 words built from 20 consonants and

seven vowels, Frommer says Na'vi, while not large enough for easy conversation, continues to develop, aided in part by a growing internet community.

"There are literally thousands of people out there who want to learn the language and have pounced on anything that exists. They've formed their own website," he says.

"I'm getting long emails entirely written in Na'vi."

This same Na'vi "web community" is now sending Frommer requests for new words.

"I received a 79-page document, beautifully organised into semantic categories, which 30-50 people had worked on, requesting new vocabulary they needed. I have my work cut out for me."

The possibilities are endless, with Frommer devising some high-brow and everyday Na'vi, as well as slang and possibly dialects for other tribes in Pandora.

But time is the obstacle.

"Right now I have a day job but I would very much like to help the community develop the language."

Gillian Cumming
Check out the Na'vi language website at www.learnnavi.org.

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